



Code for America and the City of Boulder, CO Partnership Final Report, December 2015

INTRODUCTION

In January of 2015, the City of Boulder partnered with Code for America (CfA) to support efforts toward building more inclusive, transparent, collaborative, and interactive community engagement strategies. The partnership complemented the city's existing outreach efforts and provided the opportunity to pilot new approaches and tools that would reach underrepresented residents.

While the initial partnership focused on creating additional channels for inclusive participation around Housing Boulder, the goal was to create a repeatable approach for other city projects as well as in other communities nationwide.

The shared goals of the project were to:

- I. Stimulate interactive dialogue and collaboration with a cross-section of the community
- II. Increase participation and move from one-way communication to multi-way dialogue
- III. Create a new approach to community engagement that can be replicated on other projects and in other communities

This report details the approach that was taken to meet these goals; summarizes the outcomes and results of the engagement; and outlines a set of recommendations for continuing to deepen community engagement in the City of Boulder.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Background

[Housing Boulder](#) was launched in 2013 to develop a next generation housing strategy that would define community priorities for the expansion and preservation of diverse affordable housing choices and identify key ideas and strategic directions for near-term action. Two central characteristics defined the Housing Boulder effort: broad community outreach to ensure an open, balanced, and fair process; and providing residents, those who work in Boulder, and other interested parties with convenient and meaningful opportunities to inform the planning process. The City of Boulder engaged CfA to help drive a broad and effective community engagement

process for the project.

Before engaging CfA, the City of Boulder had developed and launched a comprehensive engagement strategy focused on both in-person and virtual community engagement. This included large events, small working groups, posting information to the city's website, and using tools such as [Inspire Boulder](#) and surveys to gather community feedback. While executing this strategy, the city team wanted to make sure they were involving members of the community that may not have participated in city processes in the past, such as renters, non-English speakers, immigrant groups, seniors, and youth. The partnership with CfA was a way for the city to complement their existing community engagement efforts and test new tools to ensure that underrepresented audiences were participating in the dialogue.

Project Team

Code for America hired Becky Boone, a 2014 CfA fellow in Denver, as a full-time senior fellow to live in Boulder and work with the city for six months. That work was supplemented with strategic oversight and support from CfA headquarters in San Francisco, CA.

Ms. Boone worked with the Housing Boulder project team, led by Jay Sugnet. The group met weekly to discuss Housing Boulder. City Council recognized the importance of the project to the community and created a process subcommittee that also met regularly to monitor and provide input on the civic engagement process. The subcommittee was comprised of three City Council members and two Planning Board members. All meetings were open to the public, and allotted time at the end of every session for the community to provide input.

Code for America's Approach

Over the past five years, CfA has worked with local governments across the country and developed a number of tools designed to increase community participation and engagement. CfA has seen that there are five key practices of effective [21st century community engagement](#):

- I. **Reach:** Defining the constituency you are trying to reach, with an emphasis on identifying those whose voices aren't already represented.
- II. **Information:** Providing relevant information that is easy to find and understand, and speaking with an authentic voice.
- III. **Spaces and Channels:** Making use of a diversity of spaces, both online and offline, that meet people where they are.
- IV. **Productive Actions:** Identifying clear, concrete, and meaningful actions residents can take to reach desired outcomes.
- V. **Feedback Loops:** Making sure the public understands the productive impact of their participation, and that their actions have value.

The project was organized around this set of practices, and tailored to meet the needs of the city and residents of Boulder. To understand these needs, and set a baseline to measure

impact, CfA conducted user research with the community and government staff to create a plan that was additive to the work that the City of Boulder was already doing.

I. EXPANDING REACH:

The City of Boulder is strongly interested in ensuring that diverse community voices and perspectives are engaged in public meetings, open houses, and online platforms. Therefore the first step in launching the initiative with CfA around the Housing Boulder engagement process was to identify who was already participating in the conversations.

CfA collected demographic data using clicker polls and surveys, and found that the majority of the people participating in the in-person events¹ were homeowners between the ages of 56 and 74, while those participating in online discussions² were more representative of the larger community, with an equal proportion of homeowners and renters participating and an even representation of age groups.

Using this data, the Housing Boulder team was able to better target outreach and build partnerships with key community groups that would help reach the underrepresented population.

Recommendations to Expand Reach:

1. Understand who makes up “the community”

The goal of the engagement strategy should be to reach a representative sample of the community of people who need to be involved, not just to maximize the number of participants. Data from the Census Bureau can be used to understand community demographics and identify the desired participant mix. Free tools like [Census Reporter](#) make it easy to find and understand this information.

2. Measure effectiveness

Collecting data on who is participating in the process makes it possible to compare with Census data to identify participant groups that are underrepresented. Here are a few simple ways to find out who is taking part in existing forums and channels:

- **Sticky dot exercise.** During a public meeting, label poster boards with key demographic categories, such as age ranges, neighborhood of residence, or gender. Have dot stickers available for people to place on the boards to identify the groups with which they identify.

¹ Example of in-person survey demographics:
https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1soDUusk6ECo_QsytgHI5Z93iwxmBPBP5Y-dSfVs2URM/edit#slide=id.g9be68b44f_0_0

² Example of online survey demographics:
<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1EkQnKix71RqpEc93wwaN7Lrl0KREbT7V6kD1ioFiDfl/edit>

- **Paper surveys.** At the end of a public meeting, conduct an attendee satisfaction survey that asks participants to provide basic demographic information and feedback on the quality and effectiveness of the meeting. This creates an important feedback loop as well as a profile of the participants (and whether some groups are more satisfied with their participation than others).
- **Online surveys.** Online surveys are a quick and easy way to reach new audiences. Be sure to include questions that collect demographic information to help understand who the survey is reaching. When designing the survey, use a tool that supports mobile-responsive surveys such as [Typeform](#) or [SurveyGizmo](#). Many residents now rely on phones or tablets to access the web.
- **Clicker surveys.** Handheld electronic polling devices, known as “clickers,” can be distributed to audience members and used to gather responses to questions. The meeting leader asks a question of the group, audience members key in their response using the clicker, and the answers can then be instantly displayed to the group. Ask demographic questions to find out who is in the audience at the beginning of the meeting. Ask for reactions to a particular issue before and after the meeting to track how opinions have changed.

3. Set clear goals

Set concrete goals for expanded community outreach. Groups that are underrepresented should become priorities in defining new outreach channels and methods, focusing on your biggest gaps first.

Well-defined goals state who you want to reach, the desired increase in participation, and by when. Such goals provide a way to clearly measure success.

Examples of measurable goals include:

- By the end of July 2015, increase participation among the targeted constituent group by 50%.
- Achieve representation from people under 40 in at least three city-hosted events by June 2015.
- Before the proposal goes before Council, hold neighborhood meetings in three underrepresented neighborhoods with at least 50 people attending each event.

4. Build relationships with key groups in the community

Regardless of tactics and technology, an effective engagement strategy is built upon a strong foundation of relationships. When trying to engage underrepresented residents, creating partnerships and working with other groups who already work with those residents helps leverage existing relationships and builds a foundation for future efforts as well. For example, to

engage more residents under age 40, potential partners could include student organizations or young professional associations.

Take the time to personally meet community leaders, attend their groups' meetings, and show genuine interest in their respective needs. Doing this helps build a coalition of community groups that will share information and encourage the participation of their members.

5. Regularly measure progress

At key points in the process, measure progress against the project's engagement goals and pre-project baselines. If trying new tactics or approaches but not getting the expected or necessary levels of participation, adjust the strategy, using the collected data and user feedback to inform decisions about alternative approaches. Keep track of all data in one place and make notes about what worked and what did not for future projects.

Signs of Success

An outreach strategy is successful when:

- Participants (both online and in-person) are representative of the community's geographic, ethnic, age, income, and other demographic distributions.
- Demographic data collection is incorporated in every engagement tactic (e.g. public meetings, online surveys, social media).
- Relationships are being developed and strengthened with local groups that represent the community's harder to reach demographics.
- Feedback loops are established that regularly measure the profile of participants and effectiveness of engagement strategies, helping to inform steps toward continuous improvement.

II. PROVIDING RELEVANT AND USEABLE INFORMATION:

During CfA's research, a primary theme was that information on the city's website was hard to find and hard to understand.

The primary access point to information about Housing Boulder was its website, www.HousingBoulder.net. Doing a full-scale revamp wasn't possible during the limited schedule of the partnership, so the goal was to make the content on the existing site as easy to understand and actionable as possible. CfA followed guidance on content strategy from project advisors from the award-winning Government Digital Service in the UK, whose website GOV.UK is a leader in writing clear and actionable content for their citizens.³

³ Screenshots of Housing Boulder Website before and after new information architecture and re-written content.

<http://www.codeforamerica.org/practices/engagement/boulder-img.html>

<http://www.codeforamerica.org/practices/engagement/boulder-img-2.html>

On the updated www.HousingBoulder.net homepage, the user was immediately able to find information about what was going on, have the opportunity to participate in the survey, and take three actions: get involved, learn about Boulder's housing story, and learn about possible housing tools and options. Each of those options took the user to another page where they could find additional information.

CfA analyzed web traffic before and after the revamp. The *bounce rate*—the percentage of users who enter and then leave rather than continuing to another page—on the Housing Boulder landing page was reduced by 10%. When looking at the bounce rate across devices, the biggest decrease was seen from mobile phones (22%).

By redesigning the content, the *average page load time* was reduced by roughly 40% for desktop and tablet users.

Recommendations on [Providing Relevant and Useful Information](#)

1. Write user-friendly content. Residents come to the website to get specific answers. Most of them don't want to scroll through a long list of project documents and outdated press releases. Do research to understand users' needs. Then provide actionable and understandable answers to those needs on the website's home page. Once a working prototype is established, do more user research and testing to check that the website is easy for people to use and understand.

To understand what residents are looking for:

- Talk to residents and other potential users before writing content. Find out what they currently know and what questions they have about the issue.
- Use [Google Trends](#) to understand the words people are searching for related to the issue.
- Do regular [user testing](#) sessions to check in with people on how they are using the site's content and how they navigate and understand it.
- Use [user-centered design](#) strategies to develop a clean, consistent visual layout, navigation and content strategy.
- Use CfA's free [City Analytics Dashboard](#) tool to see how users navigate the website, in real time.

2. Write for the web. Good web content is accurate and easy to read. It is also displayed differently than a technical document or report. Writing for the web means:

- Keeping information brief and to the point.
- Using plain, simple, and jargon-free language.
- Structuring pages to work clearly across a variety of platforms and devices.
- Publishing information in the most commonly spoken languages in the community in addition to English whenever possible.

- Publishing information in open digital formats, like HTML, instead of proprietary formats like PDFs. Open digital formats make content more accessible across more platforms, including mobile devices, which are often the primary way residents access the Internet. They also make it easier for others to share content.

Learn more about content strategy:

- The [18F Content Guide](#)⁴ helps writers create content that's easy to use.
- The Code for America [user needs playbook](#)⁵ offers ways to focus city websites on real users' needs.
- Learn from the UK's Government Digital Service about [how users read content](#)⁶.

3. Keep content up to date. It is important to ensure that content is timely, relevant, and accurate. People get frustrated and lose trust in websites if content is out of date or wrong, advertises events that already happened, or has broken links.

To keep content up to date:

- Regularly check analytics data to understand which pages become more or less popular over time.
- Remove information that is no longer accurate. Remove old, irrelevant pages regularly.
- Publish content on current issues; monitor social channels, local blogs and news sources to see what relevant conversations are happening and join in.

Signs of Success

Web-based project information is useful and relevant when:

- Produced in HTML by default.
- Accurate, timely, and regularly reviewed.
- Organized based on analytics.
- Curated (updated, archived, and deleted) based on clear criteria.
- Free of jargon, written in plain language, and at an 8th grade reading level.
- Published in the most common languages spoken in your community, in addition to English.

III. USING NEW CHANNELS EFFECTIVELY

User research highlighted that many people weren't taking part in traditional public meetings

⁴ The 18F Content Guide: <https://pages.18f.gov/content-guide/index.html>

⁵ Code for America's user needs playbook: <http://www.codeforamerica.org/our-work/initiatives/digitalfrontdoor/playbook/user-needs/>

⁶ GOV.UK manual on how users read: <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/user-centred-design/how-users-read.html>

because they were held in spaces or at times that were not convenient or welcoming. To invite participation from everyone, CfA worked with the city team to open up a variety of spaces and channels (both online and in-person) that were accessible, safe, and welcoming.

In Boulder, CfA identified spaces where target constituencies were already meeting in order to gather feedback where it was convenient for them, including:

- Dia del Nino
- Meals on Wheels Cinco de Mayo Dinner at Cafe Classico
- Women Who Startup
- [CU Boulder Off-Campus Housing Fair](#)
- [Startup Week](#)
- [Ignite Boulder](#)
- [Analyze Boulder](#)
- [Code for Boulder](#)

Additionally, the city deployed [Textizen](#), a tool built by Code for America Fellows in 2012, as a way to bridge both digital and physical channels for communication to reach as many people as possible. Textizen, which creates text message (SMS) surveys and analyzes their results, was used to pose a consistent set of simple housing questions to attract interest and drive people to the Housing Boulder website.

On April 27th, Housing Boulder held a “Fresh Perspectives on Housing Boulder” panel at First Presbyterian Church. Seven of the nine City Council members were present. With the support of CfA, Housing Boulder took this event as an opportunity to use digital tools as a way to help residents participate in the discussion remotely.

The city communications team used [Twitter](#) to promote and communicate with residents during the event, [Periscope](#) to live-stream the event to Twitter users, and [SurveyGizmo](#) to conduct two polls, one before the event and one after. Roughly 200 people attended the panel in person, while 636 live viewers logged onto the Periscope live-stream.

As a measure of engagement, 225 users “hearted” the Periscope stream. The survey results indicated that the demographics of participation online were more representative of the City of Boulder’s actual demographics than the attendance at the in-person event.

By diversifying the spaces and channels available for residents to participate in the housing conversation, the Housing Boulder team realized a significant increase in participation among constituent groups that weren’t participating before. They received:

- 549 responses to the housing survey;
- 58 responses through paper forms;
- 72 responses through Textizen; and
- 419 responses online through SurveyGizmo.

Recommendations on [using new channels effectively](#):

1. Use digital channels as well as offline meetings. Digital channels are important complements to offline meetings because:

- Residents can participate whenever it is convenient for them.
- People who can't physically attend meetings (because of mobility, geography, or work and family constraints) can participate.
- Young people (who are disproportionately heavy users of digital channels and often underrepresented) are more likely to participate.

Broadcast public meetings and events on digital channels that are easy for residents to access. Use Twitter to provide real-time text-based updates. New tools like [Meerkat](#) and [Periscope](#) make it cheap and easy to broadcast live video to the public from a mobile device. Early adopter governments like the City of Philadelphia [have already used Meerkat](#) to broadcast events. People who can't attend the event can still watch the meeting and stay informed.

Supplement online video streaming with digital participation tools so people can be informed *and* provide feedback. Promote livestream with a hashtag for people to use on Twitter or Facebook, which creates a conversation that can be found in one place.

2. Use tools to meet people where they are. Not everyone will want to attend a public meeting or watch a livestream. Meet people where they are in their physical environment and make it easy for them to take part when it's convenient for them. In addition to Textizen, use Code for America's [CityVoice](#), a place-based call-in system to collect community feedback on places (like vacant properties or public parks) using the telephone.

3. Work with community partners. Hearing a message from a trusted voice rather than a stranger or a distant authority figure can make the message much more resonant. Consider developing neighborhood outreach programs like Philadelphia's 311 Neighborhood Liaison program⁷ or Somerville, MA's program to reach more immigrant residents.⁸ These kinds of programs create partnerships with trusted community figures to deliver authentic and relevant messages on your behalf.

Signs of Success

Channels and spaces are being used effectively when:

- Participants are able to engage through both online and in-person channels.

⁷Philly311 Neighborhood Liaison program:

<http://www.phila.gov/311/aboutus/Pages/NeighborhoodLiaison.aspx>

⁸ Somerville, MA's ResiState program:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MscPGVijqU&index=32&list=PL65XgbSILalWFStqV0z0N9pvftstJ8AAh>

- There is good information on which channels different participant groups favor, and those channels are available to them.
- The kinds of feedback from online and in-person channels is consistent and can be compared.

IV. ENCOURAGING PRODUCTIVE ACTIONS

Another central focus of this partnership was to create ways for residents to actively participate in the Housing Boulder planning process and express their opinions at public meetings.

The city and CfA worked to strengthen the [Code for Boulder Brigade](#), a group of civic volunteers who create digital tools and employ design thinking that can improve city services. The Code for Boulder Brigade is one of over 100 such volunteer chapters supported by Code for America.⁹ It is relatively new, and the goal for the Brigade over the six months of the project was to help them become a stronger partner to the city, that could support efforts to engage residents after the contract period was over.

As a starting point, Code for Boulder hosted a large event in February 2015 to convene residents around the housing topic and begin to prototype tools that residents thought would be useful to inform input on the topic. They began working on a tool that will make the city's permit data more accessible by enabling residents to sign up for location- or topic-based notifications and comment on active development review projects¹⁰. This Code for Boulder Brigade project is a key vehicle through which the public can learn about and give input on current development in the city. It allows residents to volunteer their skills to build useful tools in addition to providing input to help shape decision-making.

The city and CfA also engaged another group of high-skilled civic volunteers through the Analyze Boulder Meetup group. Analyze Boulder brings together designers and data scientists to analyze and visualize data about the city to help illuminate city issues. Analyze Boulder helped the Housing Boulder project team organize and present its housing data more clearly, thus improving the information the city uses to educate people on housing.

Recommendations on [Encouraging Productive Actions](#):

1. Use a resident survey. Well-designed surveys are an easy way to collect targeted, actionable data and feedback from participants to inform decisions. They are also a good “foot in the door” for participants, because they take very little time, can be completed at any time or place, and don't require people to identify themselves. Done well with regular feedback, answering a survey can lead to more involved participation.

⁹ Code for America's volunteer Brigade program: <https://www.codeforamerica.org/brigade>

¹⁰ City of Boulder Development review projects: <http://gisweb.bouldercolorado.gov/agswebsites/pds/development-review/>

Tips for deploying good surveys:

- Use digital surveys to reduce the time spent collecting, combining, and typing up results.
- Use online survey platforms that are mobile responsive (i.e. can be taken via mobile phone or tablet) such as Typeform or SurveyGizmo.
- Share survey results immediately with participants, if possible. If not, collect email addresses to report back.
- Ask for clear and specific information, rather than vague or open-ended feedback. For example, ask respondents to rank a set of actions to help the city prioritize.
- At the end of a survey, make sure participants:
 - a. are thanked for their time;
 - b. understand how their input is being used; and
 - c. have ways to stay involved in the project.
- Work with community groups to promote the survey and make sure people know about it.
- Collect demographic information in the survey to check whether or not you are reaching a representative sample of the community.

Conducting a representative survey is successful when you:

- Collect responses from at least 1 in 1,000 residents, with geographic, ethnic, and age distributions similar to the city's census data.
- Ask questions that help prioritize or identify actions to take.
- Write in the major languages spoken in your community, not just English.
- Have an outreach strategy to make sure people know about the surveys.
- Share the results back with participants and the public.

Learn about designing online surveys in Code for America's [Resident Survey Guide](#)¹¹.

2. Let people participate often and regularly. Let people participate throughout a project, not just during certain stages. This will make it easier for people to participate and continuously provide feedback, producing more meaningful work. Think about how people can participate from the beginning and not just react to decisions that have already been made.

3. Work with community groups. Digital technology has created many opportunities for people to productively get involved with designing and building government services. CfA facilitates a network of volunteer groups called Brigades who work with their local governments to use technology, design, and data to improve their communities. Working with a local Brigade

¹¹ Code for America's Resident Survey Guide: <http://www.codeforamerica.org/our-work/initiatives/digitalfrontdoor/playbook/user-needs/run-a-resident-survey.html>

engages members of the community in accomplishing project goals, while also creating ways for residents to participate in local government.

4. Do research with residents. Get into the habit of doing civic user research, where residents help evaluate a government service or project from a user's perspective. Feedback from these research sessions can be used to help make services easier to use, responsive to people's needs, and ultimately, more successful. The act of testing a service or tool is a very direct way for citizens to feel like their feedback will be used.

Civic User Testing (CUT) groups exist all around the country, including [Oakland](#), [Chicago](#), and [Chattanooga](#). The Smart Chicago Collaborative has a [guide](#)¹² on how to implement a CUT group.

Signs of Success

Productive actions are successfully encouraged when:

- Government officials ask residents to get involved, and what they are asking for is clear and specific.
- Interactions between the city and the public are positive and cooperative.
- Government officials can easily understand public feedback and use it to help make decisions or improve processes.
- There are many, continuing ways for residents to meaningfully engage with the city's work.
- Residents understand how their involvement will change their community in the long term.

V. CREATING USEFUL FEEDBACK LOOPS

In Boulder, CfA found that many people didn't trust the existing process, felt like decisions were already made, and didn't think their input would make any meaningful changes. A key goal was to keep residents informed of the status of the project, as well as aware of how their input was being used to shape city decisions.

To do this, the Housing Boulder team collected email addresses of participants and created an email list to provide regular newsletters that provide project updates and ways to stay involved. This was a practice the city had utilized in the past, allowing it to communicate with stakeholders who self-identified as having an interest in particular topics.

An online survey was released on the Housing Boulder website which asked residents about their biggest housing challenges and needs in Boulder and included an instant report out. When the participant finished the survey, they could see the overall results and learn how their

¹² The Smart Chicago Collaboratives Civic User Testing Guide: <http://www.cutgroupbook.org/>

answers compared to other residents.

In addition, the Housing Boulder team developed a practice of surveying participants about their experience during public meetings. While this feedback did not necessarily inform the policy goals of the Housing Boulder project, it did help the city better understand the effectiveness of outreach tactics.

Finally, the installation of a citywide website analytics dashboard (which collects real-time data around how people use and interact with the City of Boulder website) will help city employees understand what information site users are looking for. This data can be used to prioritize what information gets shared back to users and how to reorganize the website's information architecture.

Recommendations on [Creating Useful Feedback Loops](#):

- 1. Express appreciation and communicate next steps.** Nobody wants to feel like their input has gone into a black hole. At the end of each interaction, clearly explain how feedback will be used and outline next steps. Acknowledge and appreciate the time given to participate.
- 2. Show things instead of talking about them.** When a participant takes part in something, they should be able to immediately see the result of their action. For example, residents who participate in a civic user research exercise should see their feedback incorporated into a web page or service redesign and understand that their participation was meaningful and a good use of their time.
- 3. Keep communication open.** Find times to send residents news and information about the topics they've discussed. Ask residents if they're willing to give their email address or phone number in order to receive regular updates. Tools like Textizen let you send follow-up messages to residents who take surveys. You can also send emails with tools like [Mailchimp](#) that come equipped with analytics to better understand how people interact with the emails they receive.
- 4. Collect feedback and make it public.** Share feedback publicly so residents can see how their whole community responded. Being transparent like this builds trust and builds consensus about how the community's input helped shape decisions.

CONCLUSION

By focusing the initial phase of partnership between the City of Boulder and Code for America around the following key engagement strategies, we were able to meet our goals of the partnership.

- I. **Reach:** Defining the constituency you are trying to reach, with an emphasis on identifying those whose voices are underrepresented.

- II. **Information:** Providing relevant information that is easy to find and understand, and speaking with an authentic voice.
- III. **Spaces and Channels:** Making use of a diversity of spaces, both online and offline, that engage people where they are.
- IV. **Productive Actions:** Identifying clear, concrete, and meaningful actions residents can take to reach desired outcomes.
- V. **Useful Feedback Loops:** Making sure the public understands the productive impact of their participation, and that their actions have value.

As a result, higher proportions of underrepresented residents participated in the Housing Boulder conversation. In addition, we were able to surface sentiment through participant surveys to understand whether residents were having a good experience in public meetings or in online forums. Eighty percent of those surveyed at in-person meetings agreed or strongly agreed that the meeting was a good use of their time.

The Code for Boulder Brigade now has a strong leadership team in place that is holding regular meetings and engaging in work on a number of projects that support the City of Boulder. Through this partnership, the Brigade was able to build a working relationship with the city staff so they can continue to meet the needs of the Boulder community at large.

Finally, the City of Boulder and Code for America have seen a strong interest to incorporate the recommendations outlined in this report for future projects. For example, the [Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan 2015 Update](#) is a target for further implementation of these approaches, which will further the City of Boulder's investment in broad and deep community engagement.